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NEED OF A PERMANENT CENSUS OFFICE.

BY WILLIAM R. MERRIAM, DIRECTOR OF THE TWELFTH CENSUS.

THE writer was placed in charge of the work of the Twelfth Census by President McKinley in March, 1899. The property he inherited from the Eleventh Census consisted of an old typewriter, much out of repair, a horse of doubtful age, a wagon practically useless, an old cart, a few scattered papers and records, a large number—something over 128,000—of census reports which had never been placed in the hands of the public, and a few odds and ends of office furniture. This was the sum total of the visible official remains of the Eleventh Census Bureau; all that was left of the plant after the expenditure of more than eleven million dollars. No one could be reasonably charged with blame in the matter. It was simply the result of a system. It was the old story of an emergency work.

The Director of the Twelfth Census was expected, in the fifteen months' time allowed before the date set for the enumeration, to organize completely and train thoroughly the force required to carry into effect the provisions of the act creating the Office. With practically no data to guide him, and assisted by few of the employees who had worked under Superintendent Porter, he was expected to prepare all the necessary blanks; to secure suitable quarters; to examine a host of applicants from whom he was to select a competent clerical force of three thousand six hundred people; to suggest names to the President for three hundred supervisors; to designate suitable persons to take the census in Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands; to choose over fifty-five thousand enumerators, making such examination of the applicants by means of test schedules as was deemed desirable to prove their competency; to ascertain the qualification of, and appoint, twenty-five hundred special agents to collect industrial statistics; and, above all things, to select experts of acknowledged character,

ability and experience to command this vast force properly; to instruct these individuals in their work; and, finally, to accomplish the mandate of Congress that the nine quarto volumes constituting four principal reports upon population, manufactures, agriculture and vital statistics should be in the hands of the American people by the first day of July, 1902. This undertaking would have been much easier had the Director been able to draw on a force of men of experience in statistical work. Fortunately, he was able to obtain the services of a few of the experts employed in the Eleventh Census. Without their aid it is doubtful whether compliance with the law would have been possible.

It is no easy task to find a man in the full vigor of life who is trained as an expert in statistical lines, and who, at the same time, possesses the executive ability to utilize efficiently the large clerical force necessary to perform the enormous amount of work required within a limited time. The Chief Statistician for Population, Mr. W. C. Hunt, possesses not only a thorough knowledge of statistical work, but also administrative powers of a high order, which enable him to employ profitably two thousand men and women. The Chief Statistician for Agriculture, Mr. L. G. Powers, was expected to organize a force of about thirteen hundred people, required to examine the schedules for 5,750,000 farms, and classify these farms according to size, crops grown and their value, conditions under which they were held—whether owned or rented—the financial results of each farm, live-stock, and other information.

The work of the Twelfth Census is sufficiently well advanced to indicate that the requirements of Congress, so far as the date of the completion of the principal reports is concerned, will be complied with. This will enable the officials of the Census Office to place in the hands of the public the nine volumes on Population, Manufactures, Agriculture and Vital Statistics about three and one-half years earlier than heretofore.

The use of the Hollerith electrical tabulating machines has enabled the Director to finish his task in the time allotted. This would not have been possible if it had been necessary to do the work by hand.

It may be interesting to know that the number of cards which have been run through these electrical tabulating machines is the equivalent of one card run through 672,800,000 times. This

will give a faint idea of the vast amount of labor involved in the different branches of this stupendous statistical undertaking.

The clerical force was appointed and organized with a view to finishing the task well within the prescribed period, but had the writer and his statisticians possessed the experience which has come to them as a result of the last two years' labors, a very large saving could have been effected, not only in time, but also in the number of people employed. There were absolutely no records in the office to indicate the period that would be required for any portion of the work, or the probable cost. This lack of records has greatly hampered the statistical work of the Census Office. It may be stated, however, that a complete history of every important transaction relating to the Twelfth Census has been prepared and placed in the library of the Census Office for use in the future, so that the official responsible for the work of the Thirteenth Census will have the benefit of the experience of those who had charge of the Twelfth.

The writer has referred to the "assets" turned over to him at the organization of the Twelfth Census Office; that calls to mind the fact that the furniture and fixtures of the present Office, including a modern printing office, are worth \$100,000. These would be practically lost in the event of the disruption of the present organization. The near approach of the completion of the principal reports, and of the consequent disintegration of the force, has furnished occasion for renewing the demand that the Census Office be made permanent. To close this office would be very much like destroying a cotton mill when there has been an overproduction of cloth. No sane person would think of razing the building, discharging the experts and dissipating the records of a commercial institution, simply because there was a temporary lack of demand for the particular article produced; and yet this is what has occurred decennially in the census bureau. It has been necessary to rebuild the whole structure at great cost and with much effort, a large part of which at least would have been unnecessary had the organization been continuous.

The idea of a permanent census bureau is not a new one. The establishment of a permanent office was first advocated in 1888 by General Francis A. Walker, Superintendent of the Ninth and Tenth Censuses. Speaking of his own experience and of the difficulty of collecting and digesting the data, he said:

"What is eminently to be desired in the interests of our statistical service is that the census should be confined to an enumeration of population, coupled only with one other class of statistics, to be hereafter mentioned, such an enumeration to be conducted once in ten years, as now, or better, once in five years, as befits so great and rapidly growing a people; while the remaining statistical inquiries now connected with the census, and even many others required to meet the increasing demand for exact knowledge, should be set on foot and conducted in proper succession, by the same bureau of the Government, during the intervals of the decennial or quinquennial censuses. Such a system would dispense with the necessity for suddenly raising and suddenly disbanding a large office; would retain permanently in service a considerable force of trained clerks, enabling them to acquire skill, insight, and rapidity of working by continuous experience; and would thus at once diminish the cost and increase the value of the results obtained."

From the time when General Walker began the discussion, it has not ceased to be a question of public interest and one which has been more or less agitated in Congress. Hon. Carroll D. Wright, United States Commissioner of Labor, in the *Popular Science Monthly* for November, 1891, expressed his substantial agreement with the views of his predecessor, in the language quoted below:

"The very worst form [feature] of the present system is the temporary nature of the service. . . . The first step toward correction lies in the direction of the establishment of a permanent census office, under which there ought to be a constant force of trained and experienced statistical clerks, and the collection of facts [should be] distributed over the ten years, instead of being crowded into a few months. . . . This would involve the employment constantly of a much reduced office force, and a field force, except for the enumeration of the population, gradually becoming more and more skillful. The expense during the whole ten years would be somewhat larger than is now involved, but the results would be of such infinitely greater value, that the increased expense would not be a matter for a moment's consideration."

Superintendent Porter, who, in the judgment of the writer, accomplished very satisfactory results in the Eleventh Census, considering the many difficulties which surrounded him, prepared a very voluminous report upon the subject of a permanent census office, and went so far as to draft a bill embodying the essential provisions. Mr. Porter referred particularly to the lack of sufficient time for preparation for the task. He advocated certain other reforms which, had they been adopted, undoubtedly would have proved useful. In Mr. Porter's report were embodied expressions of opinion from eminent statisticians in this country and

in Europe, officers of commercial organizations, State commissioners of agriculture, officers of State agricultural and horticultural societies, directors of agricultural experiment stations, commissioners of State labor bureaus, officers of boards of health and educational and benevolent institutions and from bishops and prominent churchmen, favoring the permanency of the Census Office.

General Walker thought that a permanent establishment would prove economical in the way of "preventing errors and getting more for your money," and he expressed the conviction that the chiefs and expert special agents need opportunity for more careful reflection in order to perfect the service, and that this is one of the most weighty arguments in favor of the proposed change. The writer is thoroughly in accord with General Walker's view. The work of preparation is simply one of a hurried physical performance, the limited time allowing the experts no opportunity for consideration of improved methods. There is no time to think, but merely to work. I quote General Walker again:

"When the next census is in preparation, two or three years should be allowed for the men to be getting their sheets up, or putting their heads together, looking over the results of past work, seeing where they have made mistakes, because no man ever worked without making mistakes, and there never was a man who would not do a certain work twenty or thirty per cent better the second time." The facts contained in the schedules "can be combined in almost infinite relations, and to statisticians and economists it is often true that the statistics which attract least popular interest are the most significant and instructive. A comparatively small trained force could work on that kind of material to an extent impossible where you have only half-trained clerks."

The Commissioner of Labor, Hon. Carroll D. Wright, said:

"No man, I do not care how great he is, how great a statistician or how great an administrator, can take a census creditably to himself or to the Federal Government under the present system. It can not be done." "Our regular army is small, but it is the skeleton of a great organization. It should be so with the census office. The constant bringing in of raw men for statistical work does more damage to statistical accuracy and to the science of statistics than any one element."

Some years ago the Census Committee of the House of Representatives took testimony as to the advisability of a permanent census bureau, and in February, 1893, filed a report of which the following is an extract. It states the necessities of the case

in succinct form and shows the situation just as it exists at the present time:

"Your committee is of the opinion that the field of operation of the census office is so broad, and such a wide range of subjects are now embraced by the several branches of inquiry, that it is impossible to do them full justice with any organization possible under existing law. To accomplish the work now undertaken by the decennial census requires a force so large as to be unwieldy, and which it is impossible to form of proper material. Were the bureau so organized that its work would be continuous, the force required would be comparatively small, and competent statisticians and specialists could be secured for the service. It is also of opinion that the amount of money needed to carry on such a continuous bureau, distributing its work through the ten-year periods, would be materially less than the amount which would be necessary to take the census under the present system; and that, in addition, the work of collection and compilation of the returns would be more accurately and satisfactorily performed, and the results obtained would be of greater value."

As I write, the faces of five Superintendents look down upon me. They include all but one of those who have had charge of the census work during the past five decades. Mr. Kennedy was the first Superintendent, in 1850, and Mr. Carroll D. Wright was the last, in 1893. The average period of service of each man was less than four and a half years. It can be well said that no one Superintendent was permitted to serve long enough to gain sufficient experience to be of real service in directing the work of the bureau. Our plan, so far as continuity in office is concerned, is quite different from that of foreign countries. Seven statisticians in as many countries in Europe have been conspicuous in statistical and census work for periods varying from sixteen to forty-two years. Austria, England, the German Empire, Hungary and Italy have the services of men of long years of experience in statistical work. The average length of service for the chief statisticians residing in the countries indicated above has been about twenty-four years—a result quite different from that of our own system, so far as continuance in office is concerned. Indeed, since the present office was organized we have lost a number of valued experts owing to the uncertainty of the continuance of the office. Two of our expert statisticians have withdrawn to accept permanent positions elsewhere. Other important officers, out of pure devotion to the work, after almost insistent pressure on the part of the Director, have declined invitations to accept more remunerative positions. It is unnecessary to state that these

frequent changes in officers occupying high places create a feeling of uncertainty and impair the general efficiency. In a bureau charged with expending a yearly average of \$1,500,000, and \$9,000,000 a year as a maximum, it would be extravagant to cast to the winds the experience of the executive heads after the Government has paid so dearly for it.

The conversion of the Census Office into a permanent branch of governmental service would insure the retention of the most capable and efficient members of the force, as a skeleton organization and a nucleus for future operations. It would provide a career, moreover, for those who desire to follow statistical work as a life vocation. As a matter of fact, the study of statistics, as a branch of learning in the great collegiate institutions of the country, has been taken up only within the last few years. The many young men who have devoted themselves more especially to the consideration of statistical inquiries would be afforded ample opportunity for the prosecution of their chosen life-work, which is now denied them because of the uncertainty of service. The Government would undoubtedly be the gainer by the employment of young men who have had technical training. In 1800 no country possessed an organization for collecting information on the subject of agriculture, manufactures or vital statistics. In fact, none of our foreign brothers had made any provision for a count of population at regular intervals. By the end of the century all the great civilized countries had provided for regular investigations into matters pertaining to national life and activity. These investigations have reached their highest perfection in our own land. The founders of the Republic evidently had no conception of what a census would mean at the beginning of the twentieth century. From a mere enumeration of population for the purpose of Congressional apportionment it has become a great national work, a photograph of the national characteristics, showing the industrial progress, sociological conditions and wonderful resources of soil, as well as other facts incident to a high order of civilization. The proper presentation of this great mass of information necessarily requires a trained force, and, as the years go by, the necessity will become greater in this regard.

After practical experience in the work of the Census Office, Prof. W. F. Willcox, of Cornell University, a Chief Statistician of the Twelfth Census, declares in a recent report that it is only

through a permanent census office that the Government and country can profit adequately by the experience of the organizing and directing heads; and that only through a permanent census office can the necessary system of voluntary co-operation with State, county and city offices and private organizations be developed and maintained.

"Only a permanent census," writes Mr. Horace Wadlin, Chief of the Labor Bureau of the State of Massachusetts, "can possibly insure a trained force of expert statisticians." If the century just completed "was the statistical century *par excellence*," as Sir Robert Giffen declares, its successor will far surpass it, not only in labor, caused by increasing population, but by the extent and variety of the statistics demanded. The question, therefore, of a permanent census office has ceased to be academic and theoretical, as it was when it was first proposed by General Walker, and is now practical and pressing. Each decade presents problems of more magnitude than its predecessors; there are more people to count, more industries to report, more farms to inventory, and more diseases and deaths to chronicle. In 1910 we may confidently expect to enroll one hundred millions of souls. This will include Alaska, the Hawaiian Islands, the Philippines and Porto Rico. To count all of Uncle Sam's children, not only in North America but in the islands of the sea, will require an enormous force, and great skill and wide experience to direct it.

The early censuses were tabulated by hand, but thirty years ago it became clearly evident that a point would soon be reached when it would be impossible to tabulate the returns of a census by such rudimentary methods within the limits of a decade. This point was reached and mechanical tabulation became a necessity. So, in the more general subject of census organization, it also became evident that there must be a point where vast population, extent of territory and diversity of subjects considered, would make it impossible to comply with the law, through the instrumentality of a hastily organized and temporary census office. In the opinion of those best informed that point is close at hand, and the attempt to complete the Thirteenth Census under existing conditions, within the time allotted by the present act, may well cause hesitation on the part of any man, however well equipped he may be or highly endowed with vigor.

WILLIAM R. MERRIAM.